

VENDING MACHINE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally relates to vending machines for vending packaged goods such as beverages. More specifically, the present invention is concerned with a vending machine of the type comprising a cabinet fitted with a plurality of shelves carrying goods, and an elevator assembly for transferring goods
5 to a goods delivery port. In particular the present invention is directed to a box vending machine.

The term *box* as used hereinafter in the specification and claims, refers to a container or package, e.g. made of cardboard (where it is often referred to as a
10 *carton*) or other suitable material e.g. shrink plastic wrap, for packaging a plurality of beverage bottles or cans, etc. Often, a box of the concerned type is a rectangular case. However, according to a different form, a box according to its broad meaning in the present specification and claims may also be a soft pack holding the beverage, e.g. a gallon of water received within a can of soft material.

15 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A variety of vending machines are available and many patents deal with different types of vending machines, such as for vending of non-food stuffs or food stuffs, the latter having a large diversity of types, e.g. for vending fresh food (sandwiches, cakes, etc.), other food stuffs e.g. snacks, and sweets, and beverage
20 vending machines which fall into two main categories, namely freshly made drinks e.g. juices, hot drinks (coffee, hot chocolate, soups, etc.) or canned or bottled beverages. The present invention deals with vending machines of the latter type.

U.S. Patent No. 4,976,441 discloses a vending machine including a cabinet, a first merchandise carrying member disposed within said cabinet having a plurality of vertically aligned conveyer racks and a vertically extending elevator disposed within the cabinet. The elevator has a movable bucket. The machine also includes a
5 second merchandise carrying member disposed within the cabinet, disposed under the plurality of conveyer racks and including at least one serpentine rack. A conveyer mechanism is disposed under the at least one serpentine rack for receiving merchandise therefrom and for carrying this merchandise to the bucket of the elevator.

10 U.S. Patent No. 5,881,911 discloses a vending machine provided with a cabinet having a plurality of slanted shelves. These shelves feed to an elevator which can be located in the center of the vending machine, to one side of the vending machine or at the rear of the vending machine. Packaged beverages will feed by gravity from the shelves to the elevator and then be delivered to the
15 delivery port in the face of the cabinet, which is at a convenient height for the consumer. The shelves in the cabinet are readily reconfigurable such that their positioning within the cabinet can be easily altered. Gravity release devices are provided on each shelf for discharging the packaged beverages to the elevator. These gravity release devices are powered by an activation device on the elevator.
20 Thus, electrical connections or the like are unnecessary for the individual shelves.

However, both the above-mentioned Patents are concerned with vending machines solely for vending unitary beverage containers, i.e. cans or bottles. Such machines are not fitted for vending boxes owing to the significant size and in particular weight of a box.

25 It is thus an object of the present invention to provide a vending machine for boxes, as defined hereinabove, in particular, though not restricted to, beverage packages such as, for example, can packs (e.g. holding 6 or more cans) or bottle packages (e.g. holding 6, 8, 12, etc. bottles, each bottle containing 1, 1½ or 2 liters or other volumes as may be desired), etc.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to the present invention there is provided a vending machine comprising:

a cabinet having a front wall fitted with a dispensing opening;

5 a plurality of conveyer racks, parallelly disposed within the cabinet, each for storing and conveying a plurality of boxes; each conveyer rack extending between a rear end adjacent a rear wall of the cabinet and a front end facing said front wall; and

an elevator assembly vertically displaceable along a path extending within
10 the cabinet between the front ends of the conveyer racks and the front wall and being displaceable between a plurality of collecting stations adjacent each said front end and a vending station adjoining the dispensing opening.

According to an embodiment of the invention, the conveyer racks are fitted with a box-displacing arrangement for displacing boxes from the rear end toward
15 the front end thereof, and by a further embodiment the box displacing arrangement comprises a plurality of free-rolling members disposed along the conveyer rack and where the conveyer rack is inclined to facilitate gravitational displacement of the boxes toward the front end of the conveyer rack. According to one particular design, the free rollers are a plurality of parallelly extending roller members, their
20 axis transversing the conveyer rack at a right angle.

According to a convenient arrangement of the invention, the conveyer racks are accessed for loading through a loading door at a rear portion of the cabinet and by one particular design the conveyer racks are inclined such that boxes are displaceable over the conveyer racks by gravity force only. However, motorized
25 displacement of the boxes is an embodiment as well.

In accordance with a different embodiment of the invention, the conveyor racks are essentially leveled and thus, each conveyor rack is fitted with a motor for displacing the boxes from the rear end thereof towards the front end. In accordance with still another embodiment of the invention, there is a common motor engagable
30 in turn with any duty conveyor rack by suitable transmission arrangements, e.g. a

linked chain, a transmission gear, etc. Accordingly, suitable control arrangements are provided.

By still another embodiment of the invention, one or more of the conveyer racks are fitted with lateral support members to prevent lateral displacement of the boxes over the rack and the distance between opposite support members is modular
5 for receiving boxes of different sizes.

According to a particular design of the invention, each conveyer rack is fitted at its front end with a toggle assembly to prohibit displacement of a duty box from the conveyer rack. The toggle assembly is fitted for releasing the duty box and
10 simultaneously arresting the next in line box. By one arrangement, the toggle assembly is activated by an activating member associated with the elevator.

According to the invention, the elevator is fitted with an elevator conveyer rack for displacing a box between a rear end and a front end thereof and by one design the elevator conveyer rack is activated by a motor and the elevator is fitted
15 with an elevator conveyer rack comprising a lever for activating a toggle assembly associated with each conveyer rack, to control displacement of a duty box from the conveyer rack. The elevator conveyer rack is fitted for traveling in an opposite direction, to allow for the lever to activate the toggle member in two operative sequences, one to facilitate transfer of a duty box from the conveyer rack to the
20 elevator and arrest the next box at a standby location over the conveyer rack; and the second to facilitate displacing of said next box from said standby location to a duty box location at the front end of the conveyer rack.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In order to understand the invention and to see how it may be carried out in
25 practice, embodiments will now be described, by way of non-limiting examples only, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Fig. 1 is a front isometric view of a vending machine according to the present invention;

Fig. 2A is a schematic side view of the vending machine, after removing a side wall thereof;

Fig. 2B is a schematic front view of the vending machine after removing a front wall thereof;

5 **Figs. 3A to 3E** are schematic representations of the portion marked III in Fig. 2A, illustrating a box-displacement assembly, at several consecutive stages of displacing a box from a conveyor rack to an elevator of the vending machine;

Figs. 4A to 4E are schematic representations illustrating a box-displacement assembly in accordance with a different embodiment of the present invention,
10 shown in several consecutive stages.

Fig. 5A is an isometric view of a conveyer rack according to an embodiment of the present invention wherein lateral support members are provided;

Fig. 5B is an elevation of the portion marked V in Fig. 5A;

Fig. 6A is a schematic side view of a vending machine in accordance with
15 another embodiment of the invention, after removing a side wall thereof; and

Fig. 6B is a schematic front view after removing a front wall thereof.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Attention is first directed to Fig. 1 of the drawings illustrating a vending machine in accordance with the present invention generally designated **10**. The
20 vending machine **10** is a relatively narrow rectangular construction being a cabinet formed with a front wall **12**, side walls **14**, top and bottom walls **16** and a rear wall **18**.

The front wall **12** is fitted with a dispensing opening **20** normally closed by door **24** which in the present example is pivotally hinged at **26** and is swingably
25 opened by means of handle **30**. However, other forms of doors may be provided, e.g. a door pivotable about a horizontal axis which may also serve as a shelf when at the open position, a sliding door etc. Furthermore, the door **24** may be automatically displaced between its open and closed position whereby suitable activation and sensing means are provided (not shown). According to a particular

design, the door **24** is formed at a height for convenient removal of a weighty box therefrom, i.e. at a height which does not require lifting the box and where minimal effort is required for carrying the box away from the machine. According to one specific design, the door **24** is formed at a height corresponding with a height of a
5 boot of an average vehicle, so as to facilitate easy loading of the box to the vehicle.

The front wall **12** is further fitted with a user interface generally designated **31**, which comprises a product selection module **32** fitted with a plurality of selection buttons **34** for a customer to select the type and amount of goods to be purchased, and a display **36** for providing the user with operating
10 instructions, information regarding the goods, advertising, etc. The user interface further comprises a paying module **37** fitted, for example, with a coin insertion and return slot **40**, credit card slot **42**, bill receiving slot **44** and an operation-canceling knob **48**.

Although not shown, the vending machine **10** further comprises a control
15 unit securely received within the cabinet and being linked to the product selection module **32** and to the paying module **37**, as well as to other components of the machine, e.g. conveyor racks, elevator, service door, delivery door, etc., as one can appreciate. Furthermore, the control unit may be fitted for communication with a remote control center, e.g. by wireless communication system (cellular
20 communication system) etc. Such communication means are advantageous for updating the control center as far as consumption of goods from the vending machine, customer preferences, malfunction of the vending machine, etc. Furthermore, it is possible that a remote control center provide online customer service support whereby the vending machine would thus be fitted with a two-way
25 speaker/microphone unit (not shown).

The rear wall **18** (schematically shown in Fig. 2A) is a loading door providing access to the cabinet and in particular to the plurality of conveyor racks **50** (depending on the available space, the vending machine **10** may be larger and thus comprise any practical number of conveyer racks). The conveyor racks **50**
30 are of the so-called *gravity conveyer rack* type and extend from a rear end **52**

towards a lower, front end **54**. The front end **54** of the conveyer racks **50** are disposed adjacent an elevator shaft **58** which is the space in which elevator assembly **60** vertically displaces as will be explained hereinafter.

Each of the conveyor racks **50** is fitted with a plurality of free-rolling
5 members disposed along the rack for displacing boxes **B** from a rear end **52** towards a front end **54** of the rack merely by gravity. Forms of *gravity conveyors* are, for example, roller conveyors (with or without a conveyor rack), wheel conveyors, ball conveyors, etc. Furthermore, in accordance with another embodiment of the invention (not shown) the conveyor racks may be motorized
10 rather than being gravity conveyors, in which case a suitable motor is provided as well as control means for activating the conveyor and controlling operation thereof.

According to a specific embodiment of the present invention, as illustrated in Figs. 5A and 5B of the drawings, at least part of the conveyor racks disposed within the cabinet of the vending machine are fitted with lateral support
15 members **74**, for preventing lateral displacement of boxes mounted on the conveyor and for correct positioning of the boxes over the rack (e.g. centering the boxes), in case boxes of smaller size are used. This may be the case, for example, when using packs of cans instead of boxes holding beverage bottles and for correct alignment of the boxes when using boxes of different sizes, e.g. boxes holding beverage
20 bottles of 1.5 liters or 2 liters, etc. The distance between the opposite support members **74** of a particular rack is changeable, e.g. by automatic biasing members or manually, to comply with the width of particular boxes mounted on the specific rack. According to a particular arrangement as illustrated in Figs 5A and 5B, the support members **74** are fitted with lateral extension rods **75** slidably received
25 within openings formed in corresponding posts **76** extending from support rails **77** of the rack **50**. The extension rods **75** are fixedly displaceable by means of fixing bolts **78** whereby a respective support member **74** may be fixedly relocated to thereby set the distance between opposing support members.

Turning now to Fig. 2A, the elevator **60** is vertically displaceable within
30 shaft **58** by means of an electric motor **66** fitted for displacing the elevator **60** along

vertical support rails **68** between a plurality of collecting stations each corresponding with a front end **54** of a respective conveyer rack **50**.

Elevator **60** comprises an elevator conveyer rack **72** suited for displacing boxes fed thereto between a rear position toward a front position adjacent the front wall **12** and optionally for displacing a box **B** toward the dispensing opening **20** once the elevator is at a dispensing level, as will become apparent hereinafter. The elevator conveyer rack **72** is a motorized conveyer fitted for displacement backwards and forwards for the reason to become apparent hereinafter and is further fitted with a toggle activating member **70** for activating a toggle assembly **80** associated with each conveyer rack **50**, as will be explained in detail with reference to Figs. 3A-3E.

Suitable control means are provided along the path of the elevator **60** within the shaft **58** for precisely stopping the elevator **60** opposite the front end **54** of each conveyer rack **50**. Such means may be any sort of switches or sensors as known *per se* and the motor for displacement of the elevator **60** may be for example a step motor. Alternatively, the elevator **60** may be vertically displaceable along rotatable threaded rods as known *per se*.

Further attention is now directed to Figs. 3A to 3E illustrating in a detailed manner the toggle assembly **80** for controlling displacement of a duty box from the conveyer rack **50** to the elevator **60**, as will be apparent hereinafter with reference to the sequential drawings 3A-3E. The term *duty box* denotes a box **B** positioned at the front end of a respective conveyer rack and which is the box to be displaced to the elevator conveyer rack **72**.

The toggle assembly **80** comprises a toggle member **81** pivotally secured to the conveyer rack **50** at **82** and comprising a front stopper **86** and a rear stopper **88**, the latter provided with a roller **90** at its top end. The toggle assembly **80** is biased by coiled spring **94** to displace in a counter-clockwise direction as illustrated by arrow **98**.

A front end **102** of the toggle member **81** projects in the direction of the elevator **60** positioned along the displacement path of toggle activating member **70** as will become apparent hereinafter. It is further noticed in Fig. 3A that in the normal state of the toggle member **81** the front stopper **86** projects above the conveyor rack and prevents forward displacement of the duty box **BD**.
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Upon demand for a particular box **B** from a certain rack **50**, the elevator **60** vertically displaces to a collecting position adjoining the respective rack **50** (Fig. 3A) and then the conveyor rack **72** of the elevator **60** rotates in the direction of arrow **108** (Fig. 3B) causing the toggle activating member **70** to contact the front end **102** of toggle member **81** to thereby pivotally displace the toggle member in the direction of arrow **108** (Fig. 3B). In this position, the roller **90** of the rear stopper **88** bears against a bottom surface **112** of the duty box **BD** whilst the front stopper **86** descends below the upper surface of the conveyor rack **50** whereby the duty box **BD** can now move towards the conveyor rack **72** of the elevator **60** (Fig. 3C). Simultaneously, the rear stopper **88** projects above the conveyor rack **50** for arresting the next in turn duty box **BN**.
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As the duty box **BD** displaces toward the conveyor rack **72** of the elevator **60**, the conveyor rack **72** rotates in an opposite direction as illustrated by arrow **116** (Fig. 3D) for removing the duty box **BD** from the conveyor rack **50** onto the elevator conveyor rack **72**. Along with the displacement of the conveyor rack **72** the toggle activating member **70** displaces, allowing the toggle member **81** to displace back in the direction of arrow **120**, permitting the next in turn duty box **BN** to ride over the roller **90** of the rear stopper arm **88** to then become arrested at the front end of the conveyor rack **50** by the front stopper **86** (Fig. 3E) ready for a next sequence of operation. At this stage the original duty box **BD** displaces along the conveyor rack **72** of the elevator **60** towards its front end whereby the elevator **60** then moves towards the dispensing station extending opposite the dispensing opening **20** formed in the front wall **12**.
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Further attention is now directed to Figs. 4A-4E directed to a toggle assembly in accordance with a different embodiment of the present invention, represented by sequential drawings illustrating displacement of a duty box **BD** from the conveyor rack **50** to the elevator conveyor rack **60**.

5 The embodiments of Figs. 3A-3E and 4A-4E are principally similar and accordingly, similar elements appearing in Figs. 4A-4E will be designated with same reference numerals as in corresponding Figs. 3A-3E. The main difference between the two embodiments resides in that the latter embodiment lacks the
10 biasing coiled spring **94** provide for biasing the toggle assembly in a counter-clockwise direction. Instead, the elevator conveyor rack **72** is fitted with two toggle activating members **130** and **132**, the former fitted for cooperating similarly to the toggle activating member **70** as in the embodiment of Figs. 3A-3E and in particular as disclosed in connection with Figs. 3A-3C. The second toggle activating
15 member **132** functions to replace the coiled spring **94** and cooperates with the toggle member **81** to displace it in a counter-clockwise direction as represented by arrow **120** in Figs. 4D and 4E. This is facilitated by rotation of the elevator conveyor rack **72** in the direction of arrow **116** which simultaneously facilitates displacement of the original duty box **BD** over the elevator conveyor rack **72** to a forward position.

20 A different embodiment is inserted in Figs. 6A and 6B illustrating a vending machine **150** which differs from the embodiment of Figs. 2 in that the conveyor racks **152** extend substantially horizontally and each such conveyor rack is fitted with a belt-type conveyor **154** driven by an independent electric motor **158** to facilitate displacement of boxes **160** in the direction from the rear end towards the
25 front end, as illustrated by arrows **164**. In this case, since the conveyor belts **152** are leveled, i.e. horizontal, there is no need to provide toggle means to ensure displacement of only one box at a time, as this is done by means of the motor **158** which is controlled by the control unit (not shown).

 In accordance with a modification of the embodiment of Figs. 6A and 6B,
30 not shown, rather than providing an independent motor for each of the conveyors,

there may be a single motor which by suitable transmission arrangements is engaged each time with a duty rack. Such transmission means are for example a linked chain, a gear transmission, etc.

Whilst particular embodiments have been described, it is to be understood
5 that they are not intended thereby to limit the disclosure, but rather the disclosure is intended to cover all embodiments, modifications and arrangements falling within the spirit and the scope of the present invention, as defined in the appended claims, *mutatis mutandis*.